

# Chapter 20: How to Help

It was amazing how much time compressed when you were panicking. I could swear that I'd just been upstairs with my partners, but here I was, barely understanding Pheniks as he babbled, and I didn't remember how I'd gotten here.

Holding my brother's elbow, I supported half of his weight while guiding him to the closest seat. He folded on himself, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes, and I crouched in front of him.

"Pheniks," I threw into the stream of his words.

They stopped, and he peered over his fingers at me.

"What happened?" I said.

He didn't want to answer me, shooting his eyes to the ceiling while his jaw clenched, but I knew how to pull words out of my brother.

Resting my palm on his knee, I said, "I can't help you unless you talk to me."

Pheniks crossed his arms. Shifted a little. But he did start speaking.

"House Kolb is what happened," he said. "Their high and middle Strata swarmed headquarters, capturing my subordinates. It was a nightmare, but I slipped past them. Thank Mother Time I've kept up some of my Kolb skills. I came straight here because what I've been doing for my House in recent years may not have been strictly legal, and... how do you not know about this?"

So, Talira had started her raid. I'd hoped to stay in the dark about it for as long as possible, putting off learning its outcome until my internal turmoil could subside, but this? This was quite possibly the best way our current situation could have gone. I wouldn't have to trust Talira with helping my brother now because I'd have a hand in what happened to him.

"Zaeden!" Pheniks shouted. "How do you-?"

"Talira sent me home a few days ago," I said, "and since I left Xygek, I haven't been keeping up with Kolb's activities."

Troubled, Pheniks asked, "Did she mean to keep this from you?"

Oh, hell. His belief in me hurt.

"I doubt it," I said. "Sometimes, she sends me away when she thinks I need a break."

Frowning, Pheniks said, "Why would you need a break? You're-"

He stopped before speaking the words that he knew I hated, which made me smile. He was doing as I'd asked, thinking before he spoke when he was around me.

"The *Lokke Vitras*?" I finished for him. "I'm still me, Phen. Accepting the title didn't make me a superhuman, immune to stress."

"Huh," Pheniks said with a look of disquiet on his face.

I'd love to further disabuse Lutov's conditioning about my role for him, but we needed to focus on his problem.

Shuffling closer to him, I asked, "Can you tell me what you were working on?"

Pheniks refused to meet my eyes.

"Something *bad*," he quietly said. "Bad enough that I'm in small part grateful that your House disrupted it."

Kolb wasn't my... Oh, what was the point?

"Is it something that could see you exiled?" I asked.

When he flinched, I winced.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to distress you," I said, "but I need to know how bad it is."

Never mind that I was perfectly aware of what his answer would be. He had to give it to me if he was to believe that I'd had nothing to do with his current crisis.

Shifting, Pheniks said, "It might."

"Well, shit," I said. "Ok. Can we mitigate this? Maybe... why were you working on the project? Just for curiosity's sake or...?"

Please, say that Pheniks would answer this question. If I was right about why he'd accepted the project and he told me about it, he might have a chance at escaping a total ruination of his life. There would still be consequences for his actions, but he'd remain a part of Lutovish society. His array and its functions wouldn't be taken from him.

First, though, my brother had to answer my question. First, he had to betray his House.

Pheniks' face worked up, going red.

"I... can't answer that," he said. "It's House business."

Shit.

“House business,” I said in an empty voice. “Tell me, Phen. Is House Zan worth getting exiled over? Is-?”

“Yes,” Pheniks interrupted. “Absolutely, yes. I can be who I am because of my House. If losing my array is the price that’s needed for Zan’s integrity, I will pay it.”

Ok, then. I didn’t know whether to be frustrated with my brother or admire his conviction. I chose admiration.

With a soft smile, I said, “That’s amazing, Phen. I’m glad that you love your House so much.”

Halfway into the process of making an indignant retort, Pheniks paused, eyeing me.

“You... are?” he said. “I thought you hated the Houses. You complain about them often enough.”

“I hate the *system*,” I said. “The Houses, at their core, aren’t so bad. I like the idea of an organization that’s focused on a single area of study, filled with people who are passionate about it, but when politics get involved?”

I made a face. I had many more issues with the Houses than the system itself, of course, but complaining about them now wouldn’t get me what I wanted.

“So, let’s look at the essence of Zan. Your House researches phenomena like the bloodsong while also working to advance the technological field,” I said. “Knowing this and given what you said about your project, is it something that exemplifies Zan?”

Closing his eyes, Pheniks hissed out a breath.

“That’s not my decision to make,” he said.

“I think it is.”

When Pheniks snapped his eyes open, I nodded.

“You’re Zan’s First Stratus. You have an enormous say in how your House is run,” I said. “Not only that but do you remember what Ko said when he first met you, so many years ago?”

“Something about being the epitome of Zan,” Pheniks said.

“Sounds about right,” I said. “So, tell me. As someone who’s so desperately loyal to the idea of what Zan should be, should your project be a part of it?”

With his jaw working, Pheniks hung his head.

“No,” he said in a small voice.

“Then, why do it?”

Pheniks peered at me from behind his hair, hanging in his face.

“Because...”

For a moment, I thought he'd keep his 'secret', refusing to give me what I needed to save his life, but then, words spilled out of him in a rush.

“Because my *shukusen* ordered it,” he said.

Finally. Thank all that might be holy.

“Ok,” I said, licking my lips. “Ok, here's what we're going to do. We'll visit Talira, and you're going to tell her what you just said as well as everything about this project of yours. You don't have to speak a word about Zan's other projects, but we have to know every detail about this one if we're going to pin it on Arion. Once Talira's in the loop, we'll go from there, but Phen?”

I reached up to squeeze his shoulder.

“You'll be ok. I'll make sure of it.”

He was very quiet and seemed so very lost, and looking at him, I saw my kid brother, hurt by a bully again.

I was going to bring Arion down.

Ha! Once this was over, I'd have removed two *shukusenth* from power in a little over a hundred years. That must be a record.

On leading Pheniks to the hangar, I noted two, darker splotches in the shadows at the end of the corridor. After telling my brother to get in a skycruiser, I wandered to Leski and Korix.

“What are you doing?” Korix asked with his arms crossed.

Taking in his disapproving stare, I said, “My job. Do you have a problem with that?”

Korix opened his mouth to reply, but Leski rested a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“Ok, Zae. Be careful,” she said, “and please. Please, please, please. Keep us and *yourself* in your thoughts over the next few hours.”

Hell, I hadn't even thought about that. What if this crisis forced me to choose between my brother's happiness and theirs?

It wouldn't come to that. I wouldn't let it.

“Everything will be fine. I promise,” I said. “Now, give me kisses goodbye?”

There was such trepidation in them! It hurt me to see it, even as they did what I'd asked.

When I joined Pheniks in the skyscraper he'd chosen, he was leaning against a window, staring at nothing, so I left him alone for the moment, feeding coordinates to the console. Once we'd reached a sufficient altitude, however, I turned on him.

"When's the last time you slept?" I asked.

"What does it matter?" he said.

Oh, damn. He'd sounded like I had when reporting to Talira a few days ago.

"You look terrible," I said. "If you've been awake for too long, you won't be coherent when we speak with our grandmother, which she won't like. You should get some rest before we reach the capital."

Pheniks was quiet for far too long, folding in on himself.

"I can't," he said. "I've tried, but I just *can't*."

"Then, start a dream sequence," I said. "I know it's not an ideal way to fall asleep but... sometimes, it's the only way."

Lifting his forehead off of the glass, Pheniks turned to me, and I could feel his stare boring into me, but I couldn't acknowledge it.

"Phen," I said. "Please. Go to sleep."

Sighing, he plastered himself against the window again.

"Ok."

After my brother's breathing had evened out, I waited for five minutes before contacting Talira.

"The fuck, Zae-zae?" she mumbled after accepting the connection. "You're supposed to be... Why are you waking me up in the middle-?"

"I have Phen with me," I said.

"Phen..."

There was a snort followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

"Zaeden, no House, you'd better not be fucking with me," Talira hissed.

Oo. She only broke that moniker out when she was *super* pissed. Or worried.

"I'm not," I said. "He came to my home, begging for help, and after I calmed him down, he admitted that Arion ordered him to lead this neurotoxin project. I'm bringing him to you now."

Talira started cursing with some of her expletives ones I'd never heard before. I found them quite impressive.

"Does he know about Rylan?" she asked.

"No."

What did she think I was? An operative in their first year?

"Do you want me to tell him?" I asked.

"I don't think that's wise," Talira said, "but it might come out in his debrief, so prepare yourself accordingly."

"Understood," I said.

Obviously, I'd prefer it if Pheniks never learned about how I'd deceived and manipulated him, but all I wanted from this disaster was to keep him safe. If that meant he learned about my deep-cover mission in Zan, so be it.

"Bring him to my apartment," Talira continued. "Hopefully, a neutral setting will make him more comfortable than a rival House's headquarters."

"Smart," I said. "Anything else?"

"Nothing. Only..."

While she gathered her thoughts, I placidly waited.

"Are you ok?" she asked. "Have you had enough time to recover?"

Not even a little bit.

"Does it matter?" I asked. "House business came to my door tonight. Am I, as the *Lokke Vitras*, supposed to ignore it because I'm not at my best?"

Slowly, Talira breathed out.

"I'll see you in a few hours, then," she said.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I said.

Quietly, I waited for her to cut the connection, and although Talira hesitated for a moment, she eventually did that. Pulling my legs up on my seat, I faced my brother, leaning against the door. See what I'd done to him, fitfully sleeping as he was and a total mess.

Watching him, my fingers itched for the steel of a blade, but I focused on how I'd help Pheniks rather than indulging that need. As we flew to Xygek, I started building his case, for when he'd eventually need it.

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